DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 402 HE 015 689

AUTHOR Bartlett, Steven J.
TITLE Philosophy as Conceptual Therapy.
SPONS AGENCY Lilly Endowment, Inc., Indianapolis, Ind.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; Concept Formation; *Educational Objectives; Educational Philosophy; Epistemology; Higher Education; *Intellectual Development; Intelligence; *Knowledge Level; Learning; *Philosophy; *Scholarship; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Perspectives regarding the "information-oriented" approach of conservative, traditional philosophy and an approach to philosophy known as "conceptual therapy" are offered. The former emphasizes scholarship, textual explication and criticism, and, in general, a knowledge of the views of traditional thinkers. Philosophy as conceptual therapy seeks an improvement of intellectual skills, and fosters a therapy for concepts and, by inference, a therapy for thinkers. It is argued that the traditional information-oriented approach to philosophy does not help its students effectively to develop intellectual skills, and that a conception of philosophy as conceptual therapy can provide a valuable contribution to the teaching and to the subject-matter of philosophy. It is suggested that the information-oriented historian of philosophy is frequently incompetent to judge the relative merit of incompatible systems and ideas because, although adept at scholarship, the historian-philosopher tends to be unable to evaluate the worth of theories investigated. On the other hand, the conceptual therapist is limited by historical incompetence (i.e., not being informed of the lessons learned over the centuries). Current attitudes toward education foster almost exclusively the first approach: an educated person is above all informed. It is claimed that the well-educated person unfortunately has not learned to think much better than peers who never attended college. The validity of the fixed intelligence hypothesis is briefly addressed. Based on current evidence, it is proposed that abilities of intelligence can be systematically developed in individuals by means of suitable training. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED224402

Philosophy as Conceptual Therapy

Steven J. Bartlett
Professor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy
Saint Louis University

HE 015 689

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Steven J. Bartlett

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

PHILOSOPHY AS CONCEPTUAL THERAPY

ABSTRACT

The author distinguishes between the "information-oriented" approach of conservative, traditional philosophy, and an approach to philosophy as "conceptual therapy". The former emphasizes scholarship, textual explication and criticism, and, in general, a knowledge of the views of traditional thinkers. Philosophy as conceptual therapy, on the other hand, seeks an improvement of intellectual skills, and fosters a therapy for concepts and, by inference, a therapy for thinkers. The major concern of the paper is to argue that the traditional information-oriented approach to philosophy does not help its students effectively to develop intellectual skills, and that a conception of philosophy as conceptual therapy can provide a valuable contribution to the teaching and to the subject-matter of philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY AS CONCEPTUAL THERAPY[1]

> "The enlightened one sees the world that others see, but does not conceive it in the way that others do." - Alan W. Watts

There are two fundamentally distinct approaches to philosophy. There is the approach to philosophy which dominates most undergraduate and graduate classes, and this is the approach to philosophy as an historical tradition in relation to which the student studies the views of great thinkers, their influences upon one another, the relations between their ideas and systems. We might call this the "information-oriented approach" since perhaps the foremost interest of the historian of philosophy is in being well-informed about philosophy. The well-informed scholar assiduously compares texts, examines translations critically, and probably knows several languages in order to reach the root meanings of concepts and words. He is likely to be sympathetic with certain of the views of philosophers with which he is well-acquainted, and seeks to provide those views with responsible and careful criticism.

On the other hand, there is a second approach to philosophy which in contrast to the "information-oriented approach" seeks to make use of philosophy so as to improve human intelligence.

Its principal concern is with thinking well; its interest is in what we might call "conceptual therapy". It begins with the assumption that no one thinks as well as he might, and believes thinking better is a worthwhile goal. This orientation toward philosophy as a discipline that is above all a self-discipline has a long tradition, going back as far as its counterpart, the study of the views of others. Philosophy as conceptual therapy recalls the values professed by Socrates, when Western philosophy was in its infancy, and, more recently, by Wittgenstein and Ryle.

Both the information-oriented approach and the conception of philosophy as conceptual therapy are of value. There is no need to regard the two approaches as hostile to one another. For the best thinkers, the two approaches are complementary; in lesser men, one-sidedness is the rule, and with this narrowed perspective come undesirable limitations.

Perhaps the worst handicap of the information-oriented historian of philosopny is that he frequently is incompetent to judge the relative merit of incompatible systems and ideas. He may be an exceptional scholar, but he tends to be unable to evaluate the worth of the theories he investigates. He is, in short, not a scientist: He is in the position of one who finds Babylonian cosmology and the theories of Copernicus and Einstein on a par, and cannot settle the question which is a more adequate account of physical reality - although he, like anyone else, is free in this connection to express what is only his personal opinion.

The conceptual therapist, on the other hand,when he is ignorant of the views of others, is similarly limited. His principal handicap is historical incompetence, and by this I mean no more than his proneness to repeat failures of the past. As a thinker, the conceptual therapist is inclined to sharpen and re-sharpen his finely honed tools, but lacking the substance of lessons learned over the centuries, a knowledge of what Robert Hutchins has called "the Great Conversation", his approach is empty of the rich meanings of that long tradition.

Our current attitude toward education fosters almost exclusively the first approach: An educated man is above all informed. He knows that the French revolution brought about certain changes, he knows that DNA encodes hereditary characteristics, he knows that Bach wrote x-number of cantatas, and generally knows that about a lot of things.

But the well-educated man unfortunately has not learned to think much better than his peer who never went to college: Their IQ's remain as close or as far apart as they ever were, and so educators have come to feel that intelligence is a fixed quantity, and that it does not improve with training. Of course, since the training in our schools is almost exclusively devoted to acquisition of information about facts, techniques, and past efforts, there is little reason why a man's intelligence should improve! You may fill a mind, on the one hand, with culture and sophisticated scholarship, or with television commercials and football games, on the other, and the outcome for intelligence

as expressed by an intelligence quotient remains pretty much the same. A man may know a great deal of information - about the history of music or about the records of the past twenty world series - yet be comparatively mediocre in terms of IQ.

The issue of IQ is not itself important here. IQ tests measure certain intellectual skills. Whether IQ tests ought to be used in some situations and not in others is a controversial matter, one which I do not propose to rekindle. My point is that education as we know know it has an insignificant impact on intelligence, on general intellectual abilities.[2] It is not hard to discover why this is so: We pay virtually no attention to training intellectual skills, so why should we be surprised if education succeeds only where it is meant to, that is in the area of producing well-informed graduates? Many of them are also skilled, highly intelligent individuals, but most of the time, they were skilled, intelligent graduates who graduated from high school three to four years before, and they were also students in grammar school with high aptitude scores, etc. In other words, and the evidence supports this, the schools have tended not to be responsible for improvement of a person's intelligence, principally because most educators had come to the conclusion a long time before that intelligence cannot be educated, and must therefore be fixed.

That intelligence cannot be trained follows no more from the fact that our educational practice fails to improve intelligence than does the conclusion 'No man can live beyond the age of 150' follow from 'Thus far no man has lived to the age of 150'.

Fortunately, recent studies have begun to erode the fixed intelligence hypothesis. Evidence against the hypothesis is encouraging beyond what we reasonably might hope. We are close to being complete novices in this area, so if our primitive attempts to educate intelligence are highly successful, how much more remarkable they must appear![3]

To return to philosophy. Granting that historical self-consciousness both is necessary and is currently fostered by our concern to bring the philosophical tradition to the awareness of students, the question is raised whether it is important to try to devise ways of training students in conceptual skills fundamental to philosophy. A few philosophers have proposed approaches to philosophical problems which involve a therapy for concepts. Nonetheless the question raised here is not so much whether there have existed a few skilled philosophers who may have served others and themselves as conceptual therapists, but whether it is possible to train students in the skills necessary for them to begin to act as such therapists. There have been gurus and shamans, healers and curanderas for many thousands of years before it occurred to us to train comparatively ordinary individuals to act as psychotherapists and physicians.

But, it may be objected, the skills of philosophy--even of that variety of philosophy oriented toward "conceptual therapy"--are so loosely defined, their identification so open to question, that the explicit teaching of them is highly problematic. Beyond a certain level of competence in informal logic, most philosophers

may be hard put to point to specific competences a well-trained, as opposed to a well-informed, philosopher requires for his work. If this were the case, which I believe it is not, then philosophers would be advised to remain historians and critics, whose skills are vague and acquired in an untrustworthy fashion during a rather long period of apprenticeship. Whether this view receives our assent or not, it has been a dominant attitude in the field of philosophy. It is therefore understandable why major contributions by mathematicians, for example - theirs being a skill-oriented field - are frequently made by persons still in their youth, while major works have usually not been produced by philosophers until their riper (i.e., more advanced) years.

Only comparatively recently has philosophy developed areas of study characterized first by the need for a set of conceptual skills, and perhaps only secondarily by the content to which these skills are applied. Such approaches to philosophy as linguistic analysis, logical analysis and formal logic proper, certain types of descriptive phenomenology and epistemology (particularly in the more systematic context of philosophy of science) - all contain an essential skill-component. Each of these areas involves, of course, a history of its literature, and so each lends itself to the information-oriented approach. This fact notwithstanding, such areas of study possess a gradually evolving methodological-doctrinal orientation and group of skills which constitute a positive content as teachable as the content of such

skill-based disciplines as mathematics, physics, psychotherapy, or neurosurgery.

Edmund Husserl, speaking of the failure of traditional philosophy to achieve the status of science, remarked

> Kant was fond of saying that one could not learn philosophy, but only to philosophize. What is that but an admission of philosophy's unscientific character? As far as science, real science, extends, so far can one teach and learn, and this everywhere in the same sense. ...One cannot learn philosophy, because here there are no...insights objectively grasped and grounded, or to put it another way, because here the problems, methods, and theories have not been clearly defined conceptually, their sense has not been fully clarified.
>
> I do not say that philosophy is an imperfect science; I say simply that it is not yet a science at all, that as science it has not begun....No reasonable person will doubt the objective truth or the objectively grounded probability of the wonderful theories of mathematics and the natural sciences. Here there is, by and large, no room for private "opinions", "notions", or "points of view". To the extent that there are such in particular instances, the science in question is not established as such but is in the process of becoming a science and is in general so judged.
>
> The imperfection of philosophy is of an entirely different sort from that of the other sciences just described. It does not have at its disposal a merely incomplete and, in particular instances, imperfect doctrinal system; it simply has none whatever. Each and every question is herein controverted, every position is a matter of individual conviction, of the interpretation given by a school, of a"point of view".[4]

The concern Husserl expressed some 65 years ago can still inspire controversy, but there has been a change. We are witnessing a growth in the field of philosophy - very gradual to us, but quite rapid in relation to the two millenia of its Western development - which supplements, but does not wish to substitute for, its tradition. Husserl's hope is no longer

just a hope: His recommendation that philosophy become scientific has begun to leave idle academic controversy behind. We need not all of us appreciate or even read the works of, e.g., contemporary analysts, logicicans, phenomenologists and epistemologists of science. But the question whether philosophy is <u>possible</u> as conceptual therapy, and the related question whether general intellectual ability <u>can</u> be trained, though they may now provoke sometimes heated discussion in terms of what <u>ought</u> to be the case, we can now begin to answer on the basis of evidence. Whether God and some theologians intended that man should fly, he now most assuredly does. With the weight of evidence available to a new perspective on education, there is good reason to believe that many of the abilities of intelligence, and perhaps all of them, can be systematically developed in normal, healthy individuals by means of suitable training.[5]

This conception of education and of a focus for philosophical work is threatening. At the same time, it constitutes a promise. All change is threatening to stability. If certain areas of philosophy have begun to lend themselves to the sequential norms of competency-based instruction,[6] then tensions may be expected to grow thanks to the human passion for exaggeration. The excessive claim is already made on behalf of non-traditional analysis that it should have sole title to meaningful philsophy. Its proponents lock horns with enthusiasts of the time-honored historical tradition, who claim tradition as the source for richness in ideas and for the eschatological self-

consciousness of the evolving human spirit. However well-founded this claim, the scholar-historian is apt, fallaciously, to conclude that his own approach should remain the exclusive paradigm for philosophy well-conceived.

Rigidity in the face of transformation makes one brittle. One is easily broken by change, and one's imaginative receptivity to growth is retarded. On the other hand, naive overeagerness on behalf of novelty excites derision and hostility. In the end, when petty passions have cooled, we may find that philosophy is capable of assimilating the perspectives of tradition with those of conceptual therapy, and realizing that it has grown in the process.

NOTES

[1]This work was partially supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment. The paper is one of several articles reporting the results of research concerning relationships between philosophical skills, the teaching of philosophy, and creative problem-solving. Cf. the author's "Cognitive Skills in Philosophy: A Teacher's Guide" Aitia, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1978-79), pp. 12-21; "The Use of Protocol Analysis in Philosophy" Metaphilosophy, Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4 (1978), pp. 324-336; "Protocol Analysis and Creative Problem Solving" Journal of Creative Behavior, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1979), pp. 181-192; "A Metatheoretical Basis for Interpretations of Problem Solving Behavior" Methodology and Science Vol 11, No. 2 (1978), pp. 49-85; "Evaluation of a Problem-Solving Course", included in Moshe Rubinstein's "A Decade of Experience and Teaching an Interdisciplinary Problem Solving Course", D. T. Tuma and F. Reif (eds.), Problem Solving and Education: Issues in Teaching and Research (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum 1980).

[2]This point has been borne out by numerous studies. See Arthur Whimbey's excellent and extensive work, Intelligence Can Be Taught (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), and references given in note 1.

[3]For a review of these findings, and for bibliographies of literature in this field, see Whimbey, Ibid., and the works cited in note 1.

[4]Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science", in Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy, trans. by Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 73-75, (my italics).

[5]See note 2.

[6]Calculus and analytical geometry are essential prerequisites to college physics in a sense akin to a need for training in mathematical logic in order to understand and to contribute to much analysis and philosophy of science;

but these may be contrasted sharply with the wholly different need to have an historical introduction to philosophy before studying 19th Century philosophy. Prerequisites, just like the approaches they render possible, may be information- or skill-oriented.